

**SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

# The Relationship between Youth Program Quality and Social & Emotional Learning

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The 2013-2016 cycle of the Minnesota 4-H Foundation's Howland Family Endowment for Youth Leadership Development is dedicated to understanding social and emotional learning and its contribution to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps. This series of issue briefs, funded in part by Youthprise, is designed to help people understand, connect and champion social and emotional learning in a variety of settings and from a variety of perspectives.

**INTRODUCTION**

A high-quality youth program provides the setting and experiences conducive to developing many positive outcomes, including positive social and emotional skills and beliefs. Efforts to improve youth program quality are essentially about creating better processes and conditions for learning to occur. The extent to which that learning is intentionally focused on social and emotional skills and beliefs can vary widely. Program staff plays a key role in cultivating the right environment and processes for SEL skills and beliefs to grow. This brief seeks to examine the relationship between quality improvement practices and improved intentionality efforts around program design to support the development of social and emotional skills.

While practices reflected in high quality program settings at the point of service are highly compatible with social and emotional learning (SEL), whether these practices alone are enough to lead to measurable social and emotional skills and beliefs as outcomes is a different question. The complementary and highly compatible nature of these two efforts in out-of-school (OST) programs is one of the primary reasons that OST opportunities are increasingly called upon to help build the critical social and emotional skills and beliefs needed for success in learning and life.

**YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY CONTEXT**

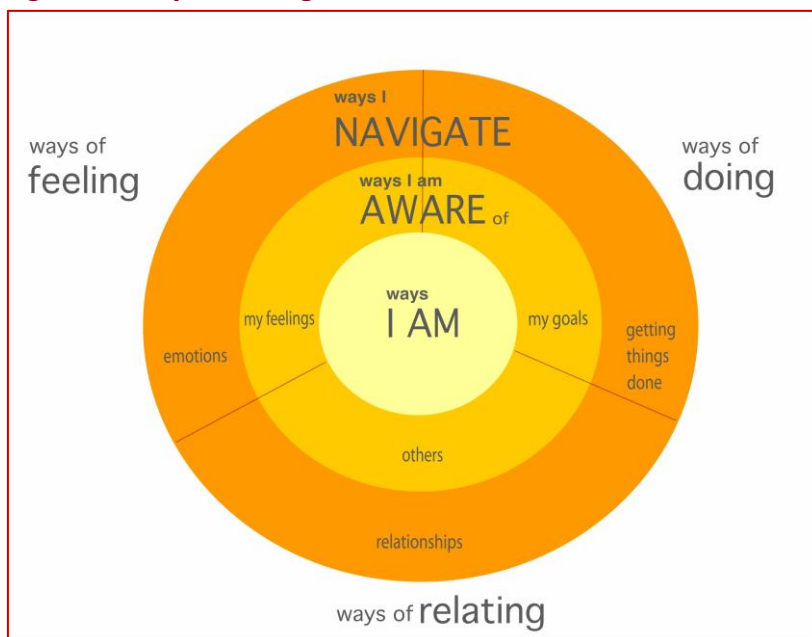
Many youth programs have invested time and money into improving youth program quality using a variety of measurement tools. In this brief we will focus on just one of the tools for measuring youth program quality, the [Weikart Center](#)'s Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) (Smith & Hohmann, 2005), which uses an assessment process based in observing youth and adults at the point of service where programming occurs. These observations result in scores representing the presence of research-based practices in youth programs. The scores speak to the quality of the learning environment and experiences. They are not a measure or estimate of the social and emotional skills or beliefs of the youth in the program.

Fortunately, the quality practices measured in the Youth PQA, as we will describe below, are often a good proxy for the program's ability to offer environments and experiences where positive social and emotional skills and beliefs can be both caught and taught. They are measures of the quality of potentially productive contexts for youth to explore self-awareness, navigate feelings, develop relationships, and set goals. Such contexts enhance the probability that social and emotional skills are "caught" by youth because they see the skills modeled by staff or built into program routines. Such contexts are also where explicit social and emotional skills and beliefs can be deliberately taught, supported and reinforced through program experiences.

## SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING CONTEXT

Improving program and practitioner intentionality around social and emotional outcomes complements but is on a different axis than youth program quality approaches and measures. Improving SEL intentionality is about how explicitly the program and practitioners are focused on helping young people develop specific skills and beliefs. It is focused on youth learning skills and beliefs that define their individual "ways of being" -- dealing with feelings, relating to others, and accomplishing tasks (Blyth, Olson & Walker, 2015; see Figure 1 [Ways of Being model](#)) that are distinct from improving the quality of the program processes.

**Figure 1. Ways of Being Model**



In exploring the relationship between improving youth program quality and improving the intentionality of social and emotional outcomes, a program might assess both the level of quality (such as using the YPQA) and the level of program design intentionality shown around one or more specific aspects of social and emotional learning. For example:

- Are there program goals for learning specific social and emotional skills?
- Are the adults aware of and do they model positive social and emotional skills?
- Does the environment have routines that reinforce skills such as self-management?
- Do youth's experiences over time help them develop a sense of mastery that builds a growth mindset where youth know effort put forth improves the results?

These are all examples of moving beyond hoping social and emotional skills might be *caught* through role modeling in a program. These practices move toward proactively working to make sure these skills are intentionally *taught* – through use of language, practicing specific skills, and reinforcing beliefs that strengthen their ways of being. We are not advocating for adding a separate and special curriculum specifically designed to teach SEL skills. Rather we are arguing that programs can choose to identify and promote social and emotional skills and beliefs as outcomes for their program participants then work in tangible ways to improve their intentionality around those skills – all while maintaining and utilizing high quality youth development practices.

We believe youth program quality is fundamental and should be the first priority – especially if it is low. There can be no substitute for quality regardless of the outcomes on which a program focuses. Ultimately, if one wants to optimize the chance that youth participants in a program develop positive ways of being and the skills that make a difference, programs must be both high quality and provide tangible opportunities and experiences for such skills to be taught. This means programs need to find ways to improve their intentionality around SEL.

## MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

Improving youth program quality and increasing SEL intentionality requires planning and designing on multiple levels. For example, designing environments and experiences that promote higher quality interaction and engagement as well as self-management skills and a growth mindset requires planning the physical environment, staff preparedness at the point of service, as well as the providing the context for activities to introduce and reinforce skill development.

This suggests that youth programs can and should be intentional about program design as well as implementing youth program quality practices. By doing so, measures of quality can be used to shape and improve the learning processes in programs in ways that allow social and emotional skills and beliefs to be caught, but they are also contexts, beyond their quality measures, where social and emotional skills and beliefs can be specifically taught.

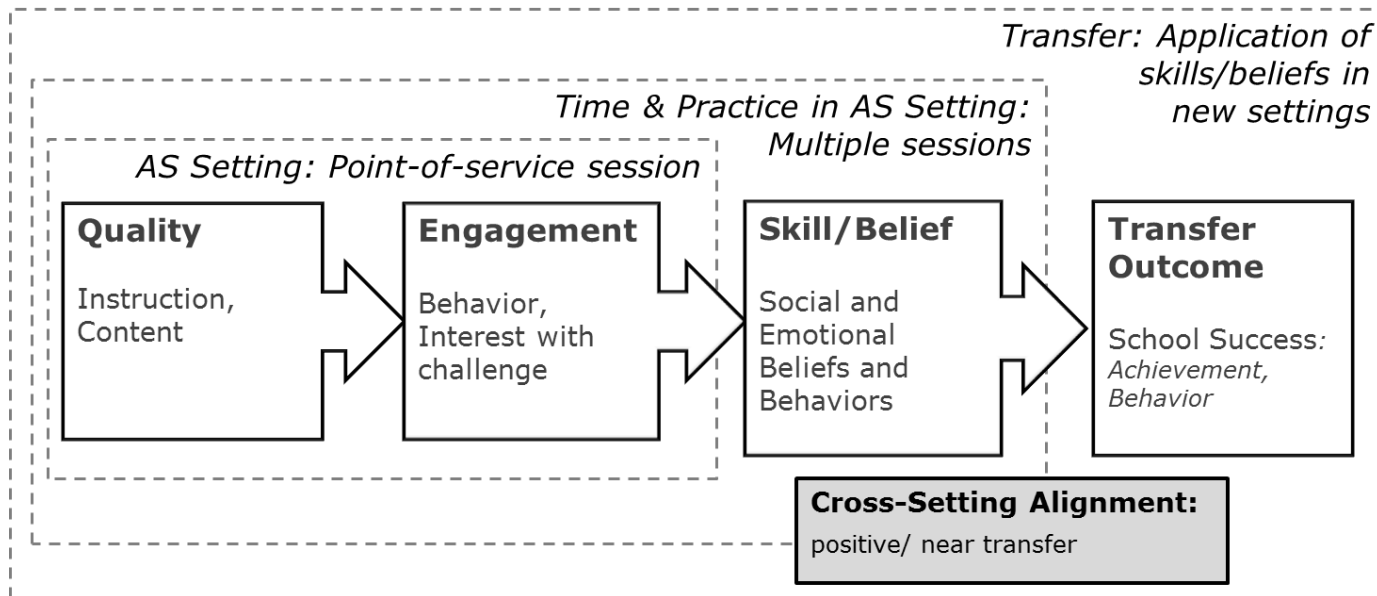
The Weikart Center has developed a logic model that highlights the relationship between the qualities of youth experience in three critical time/setting frames – in each afterschool session, across multiple sessions, and in a new setting (e.g., school). This model, called the QuEST model (quality, engagement, skills, and transfer) is shown in Figure 2 (Smith et al., 2012). It connects the various aspects of youth program quality and youth engagement in the program setting. Over time this potentially leads to development of skills and beliefs that come to be used in the program setting. Ultimately, it is hoped that some of the skills and behaviors that develop are transferred to other settings beyond the youth program. With more alignment between the afterschool setting and the transfer setting, the more likely it is that the young person will be able to transfer the skills learned in one setting to the other.

Using this model one could argue that increasing SEL intentionality in a quality program involves three things:

- First, identifying the specific skills and beliefs that one is trying to develop in program participants – the program outcomes/outputs. For example, the recently released field guide, *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning* (Smith et al, 2016) identifies six domains of skill: emotional management, teamwork, empathy, responsibility, initiative, and problem solving. Any SEL skill could be inserted.

- Second, intentionally incorporating these identified skills into the program design with activities and reflection.
- Third, facilitating the transfer of these skills to other contexts. This transfer involves reinforcing ways the practice recurs over time in multiple sessions and in other contexts, leading to transfer of outcomes to other settings.

**Figure 2. QuEST Model**



Perhaps an analogy for how youth program quality and social emotional learning intersect may be useful in summarizing these points. Improving youth program quality is like cultivating the soil for growth of specific SEL skills. Once specific SEL skills are identified, the quality of the soil can be cultivated with the best mix of nutrients to help optimize growth. Enriching the learning environment and learning experiences with activities and practices that align with the quality indicators can improve our impact on youth outcomes. Each stage of the QuEST model is a building block: improving the quality of the environment and experiences youth have in a program, improving intentionality around both the selection of outcomes and how these outcomes are worked on in the program, and lastly, improving the ways we encourage the transferability of these skills and beliefs.

## MAPPING SEL & YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY

This connection between quality and SEL skills can be further illuminated when we overlay the [Ways of Being model](#) (Figure 1) with the Weikart Center Youth Program Quality pyramid (Figure 3). The Ways of Being model is taken to a more detailed level in a companion issue brief that outlines four specific [strategies to intentionally support SEL](#) in youth program settings emphasizing that best practices can be embedded into current program design (Blyth, Olson & Walker, 2015). These best practices do not involve any specific curriculum for implementation, rather they focus on intentionally equipping staff with skills and designing learning environments to best cultivate the growth of SEL skills.

This section explores how the Weikart Center Youth Program Quality Pyramid and the Ways of Being model complement one another. The Weikart Youth Program Quality approach is based in positive youth development research, and the desire to create a safe, supportive, interactive, and engaging environment for youth. This approach is premised on the belief that it is the role of adult staff to set up an environment for youth in which needs are met and learning is encouraged—to create the rich soil in which youth can grow. The pyramid provides a way to organize

the multitude of things adult staff do to create a positive learning environment for young people, and to provide opportunities for youth to interact, plan, make choices and lead within the program.

The [Youth Program Quality Assessment tool \(YPQA\)](#) measures specific indicators such as Interaction (youth participate in small or large group conversation; an adult leader shares control with youth) and Engagement (youth make plans; youth are encouraged to set project or program related goals). As an example, these types of quality indicators also speak to opportunities to develop SEL skills of Relating and Goal Setting.

The measurable indicators within the YPQA provide a road map for creating opportunities for youth to feel actively engaged and to build SEL skills into the program environment. Building upon a solid foundation at the base level of the pyramid, youth reach toward the higher levels beyond the safe environment. They need to be well supported and provided opportunities to explore and refine SEL skills such as emotional management, teamwork, planning and problem solving within the quality context. Let's briefly explore each domain of youth program quality in more depth with an overlay of SEL skills.

## AN OVERLAY OF SEL SKILLS ON YPQA DOMAINS

### SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Physical and emotional safety provide the foundation for a quality youth program. Programs that consistently provide a safe environment for participants exhibit a positive emotional climate, where young people help and support each other, and where any negative behavior is mediated by program staff. Safe environments are also free from bias, such that youth from all backgrounds and all orientations feel comfortable interacting and trying new things (Smith et al 2012). In safe environments, youth learn and apply SEL skills to treat each other with respect, share with one another and learn (Pierce, 1994). This base of physical and emotional safety is essential for skills such as self-awareness and emotional management to take root and eventually thrive.

### SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

The next domain focuses on creating a supportive environment, where youth feel welcome and engaged, where they are encouraged to develop new skills and where conflict is constructively reframed.



Active engagement in a program requires that staff provide activities offering a balance of work on concrete projects and learning of abstract concepts, and that youth are given opportunities to discuss what they're doing. These activities help youth develop SEL skills such as critical thinking and communication. As young people engage in these activities, they may encounter new concepts or practices that cause them to struggle with completing tasks. Program staff can support their skill development by breaking complex tasks into simpler ones, modeling how things should be done, and then offering encouragement and guidance when needed (Smith et al, 2013). Shernoff (2013) describes how scaffolding of skill practices can work toward skill improvement. For example, demonstrating how to do something can be followed by staff suggesting strategies, providing hints, and providing feedback as youth try out the skill on their own. Staff can also support young people in development of the self-regulation needed to complete challenging tasks. Other SEL skill areas for this domain are emotional management and problem solving. Staff can help youth to recognize and name the feelings they have about the things they are doing and help them find alternate strategies when they encounter obstacles (Rusk et al, 2103). The quality indicators for supportive environment give an important context for this type of skill building. If one is focusing on building these skills, it is also easy to imagine ways of intentionally creating and managing the learning environment to support teaching these skills.

## **INTERACTION**

Youth interact in programs at a variety of different levels. High quality interaction is indicated when youth are able to appreciate each other's perspectives and opinions and collaborate effectively. Providing youth opportunities to learn then practice leadership skills is key. Youth learn to share ideas and give and receive constructive criticism while contributing to discussions. Interaction with adult program staff is as important as interaction with peers. Quality programs give youth opportunities to partner with adult staff, and allow youth to share control of the program, such as coming up with rules for the program, or planning activities. All of these modes of interaction help youth create a sense of belonging and togetherness, both with their peers and program staff (Smith et al 2012). When youth are collaborating effectively, they learn to recognize when and how they may choose to lead and when they can help or mentor their peers to achieve individual and group goals (Larson, 2007). Positive interactions such as these that occur in quality programs can help strengthen self-awareness and relationship skills, and contribute to learning interdependent roles through teamwork. Cooperative learning becomes more manageable and youth reinforce skills in supporting each other.

## **ENGAGEMENT**

In the YPQA, the domain of engagement refers to a specific set of activities: planning, choice, and reflection. Programs with high levels of engagement give youth numerous opportunities to plan activities and determine for themselves how they will complete tasks. Program leaders help youth work through planning processes, such as brainstorming and goal-setting. Youth are given opportunities to make choices, such as deciding what they will do or what role they will play in an activity. Finally, staff give youth intentional opportunities to reflect on what they've done, whether that's having youth evaluate their own experiences, making connections between what they've done and other parts of their lives, providing feedback about activities, or making plans for future activities. In creating structured opportunities for youth to engage in these ways, youth have a learning environment that supports goal-setting, decision-making, planning, and reflection (Smith et al, 2013). SEL skills such as perseverance and responsibility can thrive in this setting as youth make choices, take on more leadership and focus on reflection.





## CONCLUSION

By providing quality learning environments within youth programs, nutrient rich soil is cultivated that provides the potential for youth to grow and develop social emotional learning skills (as well as other outcomes) that contribute to success in learning and life. In an ideal setting, high quality program practices allow for improved engagement that enriches the opportunity for SEL skills to take root. As these skills are practiced and reinforced they become transferable to broader life settings. Youth Program Quality indicators help define healthy environments that provide opportunities for SEL skills to thrive. Improving the intentionality of those environments further helps ensure the development of SEL skills and beliefs. Thus, the intersection of improving youth program quality and improving intentional learning of SEL skills positions youth programs as powerful places for youth to develop essential life skills. Now is the time to use continuous improvement processes to both improve youth program quality and intentionality around social and emotional skills and beliefs.

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